



Member Picks

Far from the Madding Crowd

Far from the Madding Crowd

Directed by: John Schlesinger

©/Presented by: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.

A Joseph Janni, Vic Films production

Produced by: Joseph Janni

Associate Producer: Edward Joseph

Production Manager: Frank Ernst

Assistant Director: Kip Gowans

2nd Assistant Director: David Bracknell *

Continuity: Anne Skinner

Casting Director: Miriam Brickman

Hairdresser: Ivy Emmerton

From the novel by: Thomas Hardy

Director of Photography: Nicolas Roeg

Camera Operator: John Harris

Camera Focus: Tony Richmond

Camera Grips: Edward Tucker

Editor: Malcolm Cooke

Production Designed by: Richard MacDonald

Art Director: Roy Smith

Set Decorator: Peter James

Costume Designer: Alan Barrett

Make-up Artists: Bob Lawrance, Phillip Leakey

Music Composed by: Richard Rodney Bennett

Conducted by: Marcus Dods

Folksong Adviser: Isla Cameron

Sound Recordists: Robin Gregory, John Aldred

Sound Editors: Gordon Daniel, Alfred Cox

Swordmaster: Derek Ware

Horsemaster: Max Faulkner

Cast:

Julie Christie (*Bathsheba Everdene*)

Terence Stamp (*Sergeant Frank Troy*)

Peter Finch (*William Boldwood*)

Alan Bates (*Gabriel Oak*)

Fiona Walker (*Liddy*)

John Barrett (*Joseph Poorglass*)

Owen Berry (*Old Smallbury*)

Laurence Carter (*Laban Tall*)

Denise Coffey (*Soberness*)

Paul Dawkins (*Henery Fray*)

Vincent Harding (*Mark Clark*)

Harriet Harper (*Temperance*)

Marie Hopps (*Mrs Coggan*)

Freddie Jones (*Cainy Ball*)

Margaret Lacey (*Maryann Money*)

Alison Leggatt (*Mrs Hurst*)

Pauline Melville (*Mrs Tall*)

Andrew Robertson (*Andrew Randle*)

Brian Rawlinson (*Matthew Moon*)

Julian Somers (*Jan Coggan*)

Prunella Ransome (*Fanny Robin*)

Victor Stone (*Billy Smallbury*)

Peter Stone (*Teddy Coggan*)

Walter Gale (*Jacob Smallbury*)

Leslie Anderson, Keith Hooper

(*Boldwood labourers*)

Jonathan Newth (*gentleman at cockfight*)

Derek Ware (*corporal*)

John Donegal (*sailor*)

Peggyann Clifford (*fat lady at circus*)

Noel Henkel (*circus manager*)

Bryan Mosley (*barker*)

David Swarbrick (*fiddler at barn dance*)

Alba (*gentleman at party*)

Frank Duncan, Hugh Walker

(*farmers at Corn Exchange*)

John Garrie (*Pennyways*) *

Michael Beint (*labourer*) *

USA-UK 1967© 165 mins

Digital

* Uncredited

'A compelling examination of a woman navigating the constructive and destructive consequences of love, all framed against the beauty of an English countryside freighted with yearning and pathos.'

– Adam P, BFI Member

Images of urban England are familiar enough in the cinema, but images of the countryside are oddly rare. When they do appear they're not there for their own sake. *Gone to Earth* and *Tom Jones* were attempts; but no one yet has accomplished for the open English countryside (as opposed to parkland and great houses) anything of a scale equal to what Minnelli did for the Languedoc, or *Bonnie and Clyde* for the mid-West.

Which is why *Far from the Madding Crowd* is so original, and must be seen. As the title suggests, Hardy's book is only partially devoted to its characters; the film takes up his larger purposes, which are to do with abstract ideas about pastoral life. From a majestic opening panning shot over the cliffs near (I think) Lulworth, Nicolas Roeg's 70mm Panavision camera puts Dorset on the screen to staggering effect, in different moods and weathers and at different seasons. Bathsheba Everdene leaves her aunt's cottage to return to the farm she has inherited, her pony and trap dwindling into a grey, sodden hill-mist. The camera zooms back from a flock of sheep in a field of golden stubble, and sheep, dogs and shepherd are suddenly seen in Wordsworthian perspective.

Bathsheba is woken after a night in the woods by a small boy learning his catechism: he is walking along the margin of a sunlit meadow, past a white horse rolling in the grass, horse and boy dwarfed by the shadowy bulk of gigantic trees. Bathsheba runs in diminutive long shot to meet Sergeant Troy over the steep green banks of what must be either Maiden Castle or Eggardon: a sense of history as well as of the scale of Nature lends this sequence of Troy's sword-exercises a peculiar pathos. When Troy swims out to sea and disappears, the camera's position (far out at sea, looking back at the land, and almost at the level of the waves) creates extraordinary feelings of space, nobility, and human insignificance.

Just as the desert was the real subject of the first part of *Lawrence of Arabia*, so the Hardy country is the real subject here. Indeed, there is much in *Far from the Madding Crowd* which is close to David Lean's visual interests and sense of audience; and in making his first blockbuster it was probably natural for the careful and straightforward John Schlesinger to take Lean as his model.

The visual splendour of natural forms – hills, cliffs and sea – is supplemented by Richard MacDonald's design. The period appears to be late nineteenth century, with bathing machines on Weymouth beach, steam engines coming into use on the land but no motor cars yet in sight, and an *Oliver Twist* workhouse for the pregnant Fanny Robin to drag herself into. Faces are chosen with extreme care; extensive use is made of non-actors. It is an obtrusively painterly film, with references ranging from Hogarth (*Temperance and Soberness Miller*) to Corot and even (the sleeping reapers/the Land of Cockayne) Breughel: these allusions, together with the images of sowing, sheep-dipping and harvesting, emphasising as they do the Arcadian character of the story, create feelings both of timelessness and of a time from which an urban audience is totally cut off. It is here, it seems to me, that the specific appeal of the film lies. The actors may not all be convincing in their parts and the story may be pretty thin, but

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pastoral myth for the smoke-bound consumer is as potent as it was in the time of Beaumont and Fletcher.

But *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a modern pastoral, and the notions of time and timelessness which loom in it are typically contradictory. The film is long and some people have obviously felt that it drags a little. On the other hand, a feeling of time passing is clearly essential to its purposes. Gabriel Oak has to labour in silence while Bathsheba first flirts with Farmer Boldwood, then marries Troy, then seems inclined to bow to Boldwood again. Boldwood is told by Bathsheba to wait until harvest, then to wait until Christmas, then to wait for six years. Boldwood sits in his sparsely furnished dining room (time is empty), staring at Bathsheba's Valentine propped between two clocks over the fireplace; he listens to footsteps in the hall, a door closing. Time is also relative: at the end, what to Gabriel seems to have happened yesterday was for Bathsheba finished years ago. On the other hand, the ideal state of equilibrium towards which the film moves is a condition in which time ceases to exist, of two people in a room beside a fire. As Gabriel says, 'Whenever I look up, there you will be; and whenever you look up, there will I be.' By repeating this line from the first reel in the last the script seems to make this classical statement of pastoral quietude even more emphatically than Hardy does.

With this minor exception, Frederic Raphael's adaptation is undemonstrative. Troy's racing becomes cock-fighting, and a sequence is invented out of his performance as Dick Turpin at the fair; otherwise the scenario stays close to the novel. Surprisingly, many of the apparently purely filmic details are there in the book: the leaves dripping on Fanny's coffin, the small boy walking behind the trees. The imaginatively staged shearing-supper sequence turns out to have been taken virtually verbatim from Hardy. At one point this fidelity results in the material not being properly absorbed (the spouting gargoyle which gushes over Fanny's grave: mystifying on the screen, fully explicable only by going back to the text), but it is an isolated instance. The real virtue of the script lies in a capable telescoping of Hardy's sprawling narrative. The rhythmical succession of short, almost motionless scenes leading up to Troy's swimming out to sea – whether it is the writer's or the director's contribution it is impossible to tell – is particularly effective in this way.

Julie Christie's Bathsheba has been criticised. It is true that she remains obstinately modern (particularly beside Fiona Walker, excellent as her maid Liddy); nevertheless it is neither an easy nor a sympathetic part, and Julie Christie has the virtue of transparency – the author's intentions shine through her. Peter Finch as Boldwood (reputed to have no passionate parts) brings to his role exactly the right degree of style and schizophrenic absurdity it demands; he is the actor with greatest technical equipment and, compared to the others, who are only partly articulate, he sometimes gives the impression of speaking in verse. Terence Stamp's Troy, all flashing eyes and floating hair, makes a serious but finally unsuccessful attempt to convey a past of honeydew and milk of Paradise. That capable actor Alan Bates as the patient Gabriel looks a little wan in a part which might have been written for a well-mannered Airedale. But, just as Christopher Plummer couldn't sink *The Sound of Music*, so shortcomings in some of the performances don't destroy *Far from the Madding Crowd*. In this careful, spectacular, and singularly beautiful film our attention is usually elsewhere.

James Price, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1967/8